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ABSTRACT

While most faculty and graduate students have opportunities to meet and begin networking at local, regional, and national meetings and symposia, the same opportunities do not exist for most undergraduates. At least four needs of undergraduates might be served by developing dedicated listservers and encouraging students to begin using computer-mediated communication. These needs are: (1) practicing communication skills; (2) creating a sense of communal fellowship; (3) providing updated sources of information that will aid their scholastic and career endeavors; and (4) developing electronic peer networks that are gender-neutral. Listservers sponsored by student organizations, such as Lambda Pi Eta, the National Communication Honor Society, provide an inexpensive way for undergraduates to develop contacts around the country and begin networks that will provide future benefits. An analysis of the Lambda Pi Eta listserver suggests that it has at least made a small start toward meeting these needs. Areas for future growth of the listserver are a World Wide Web browser, a database of information about various graduate programs, and a database of current thinking about communication concepts and perspectives written by master scholars. (Contains nine references. Appendixes present information on subscribing to the Lambda Pi Eta listserver and data on usage frequencies of the listserver.) (RS)

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Peer Networking: Making Connections,

The Case for Undergraduate Oriented Listservers

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Abstract

While most faculty and graduate students have opportunities to meet and begin networking at local, regional and national meetings and symposia, the same opportunities do not exist for most undergraduates. Listservers sponsored by student organizations, such as Lambda Pi Eta, the National communication Honor Society (lambdapieta@UAMONT.EDU), provide an inexpensive way for our undergraduates to develop contacts around the country and begin networks that will provide future benefits.

Peer Networking: Making Connections,
The Case for Undergraduate-oriented Listservers

Introduction

Long before Aronson (1976) and Schutz (1966) formalized the idea that human beings were social animals and had strong needs for being included into groups with other humans, our ancestors worked hard to form and maintain groups. From the earliest days, all cultures believed in and practiced the notion of nuclear and extended families, created a sense of community, and used communication to maintain these linkages. This sense of connection and the need for inclusion is just as strong today as it was during the time of the hunter-gatherers.

With the development of new technologies and with their ease of use, we, as college professors, have found it much easier to "keep in touch" away from our annual meetings and symposia. Through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems, such as electronic mail and discussion group and news group listservers, we can easily talk with colleagues across the campus, the state, the country and the world. We have "wired up" ourselves and our graduate students, and now we are beginning to "wire up" our undergraduates.

The title of this convention, "Communication and Collegiality: Constructing the Reality of the Academic Work Place," could not be a more appropriate place to highlight the

need to begin including our undergraduates as an integral segment of the technological academic workplace. As more undergraduate students on campuses around the country and the world begin to use computer-mediated communication, there is a need to provide them with the same opportunities for connecting with and networking with their contemporaries as we have provided for the professorate and graduate students.

Developing and operating listservers designed to fulfill the needs of our undergraduates should become a priority for all individuals involved with undergraduate student organizations. This paper will argue that (1) undergraduate listservers will meet needs that our undergraduate students have, and (2) show how one undergraduate listserver, Lambdapieta, has attempted to meet those needs.

The Need for Undergraduate Listservers

Encouraging undergraduate students to make use of electronic mail and developing listservers dedicated to undergraduate interests fulfills at least four significant needs, including (1) practicing communication skills, (2) creating a sense of communal fellowship, (3) providing updated sources of information that will aid their scholastic and career endeavors, and (4) developing an electronic equivalent of an "old boy network" that is gender-neutral. Let us consider each of these needs in turn.

Communication Skills

Communicating electronically provides an opportunity to practice both written and oral skills. Coate (1994) suggests that "online" communication is a hybrid form that isn't just written communication or just oral communication, but a combination of both. Computer-mediated communication is rapidly accepted by people newly introduced to this channel and is widely used (Steinfield, 1990). I have noticed, and have heard other anecdotal evidence, that students who regularly make use of electronic mail have increased their communication skills more rapidly than those who do not avail themselves of this channel or who use it sparingly.

One argument that has been raised against this type of communication is that the communication loses many of the relational qualities that face-tp-face interactions have, especially in the area of nonverbal communication. There is evidence that these fears may be unfounded or at least exaggerated. Walther and Burgoon (1992) suggested that there is an initial drop in the relational qualities of computer-mediated communication when compared to face-to-face interaction, but that as the communicators become familiar with the new medium and with each other, the lost relational qualities are restored. Computer-mediated communicators have become very adapt at sending nonverbal messages with the use of keyboard characters and the

use of capitalization.

The use of a listserver by undergraduate students to supplement their use of electronic mail would provide more opportunities to practice and improve their communication skills in a hybrid medium that is both oral and written. The great advantage is that while practicing these new skills, they will be creating a new community.

Communal Fellowship

Coate (1994) and Steinfield (1990) both point to the advantages of CMC in helping to build a sense of community.

Steinfield's (1990) study of electronic mail at Xerox indicated that the medium's role in the workplace quickly extended beyond its intended work-enhancing purpose. While electronic mail significantly contributed to the work effort and productivity, it also had the unintended but beneficial effect of helping to inculcate organization values as a part of the socialization process and of providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information that used to be met by the frequent work-social gatherings for morning and afternoon coffee at the local cafe that occurred in most small communities or around the "water cooler" in large organizations, but lately, that have all but disappeared. The medium helped Xerox develop a sense of community that evolved around the workplace. A concerted effort to get our students "online" would be an important step in the

re-invention of the workplace community. But CMC also presents the opportunity to build community in a larger sense.

Coate (1994) argued that CMC provided the opportunity to build a community in the sense of Oldenberg's (1991) "third place." Oldenberg (1991) posited that one's home is the "first place," one's point of employment is the "second place," and one's informal gatherings at neutral sites where equality is the norm is the "third place." Coate (1994) views CMC as this "third place" where one comes to gossip, trade jokes, discuss current events or just talk about nothing and everything. It is the "third place" interactions that fulfills one's need to belong and at the same time builds community. Electronic mail and listservers dedicated to the needs of undergraduate students provide the students with "second place" and "third place" opportunities to build their own community of communicators who are drawn together by their central interest in communication from which they are free to roam far and wide. And CMC has the added advantage of being asynchronous, allowing each member of the community to be there without having to be there at the same time. Besides filling the need to belong to multiple "places," listservers also become sources of information that will aid our accomplishments and endeavors in the "second place" as well as in the "third place."

Information Sources

Listservers offer a rapid and efficient channel for the dissemination of information to a large number of people with similar interests who may peruse this information at their own convenience.

Dedicated listservers will allow our undergraduate students to share with each other the online locations and addresses of databases and other sources of information. The movement toward online availability of data, books, papers and government documents makes it increasingly necessary that our students learn how to avail themselves of this wealth of information that is so vitally important to their academic growth (Bradsher, 1994). Listservers provide a way to share these sources with like-minded peers.

On many campuses, much of the information that used to be passed around by paper memos is now passed electronically. Listservers and local campus distribution lists help to ensure that all segments of the academic workforce, including students, are kept appraised of the latest news and upcoming events that often impact them personally.

Listservers also permit the dissemination of information about conferences that invite undergraduate student participation as well as conferences designed for undergraduates, grants and awards for students, and graduate programs. Joining and

contributing to listservers provides students with the knowledge of the new electronic technologies that are becoming ubiquitous in the workplace. Bringing such skills with them to the job market may be just what is necessary to be chosen for a position when all other considerations are equal (Allen & Hauptman, 1990). Finally, listservers provide a method for building wide-ranging networks that will last and be beneficial for a lifetime.

Career Enhancement

In the tough world of organizational "downsizing" and "rightsizing," students completing degrees and entering the workplace are competing for positions in a dwindling resource base. All too often now, position openings are no longer widely advertised. Listservers provide a way to develop a network of peers that ranges over a wide territory that may be cultivated and maintained for the long haul. Networks may keep members abreast of new developments in their chosen fields and may be source of information on open work positions and career-enhancing positions (Rogers & Argawala-Rogers, 1990). There is no reason that networks developed during one's college years with the use of listservers could not be effective as the networks promoted by campus organizations such as fraternities and sororities or not be as long lasting.

This paper has tried to demonstrate that developing and promoting the use of listservers intended solely for the

undergraduate student could meet four significant needs. Participation in the discussion on specialty-oriented listservers would present an opportunity (1) to develop and practice communication skills, (2) to create a sense of community among like-minded individuals, (3) to be a wide-ranging source of scholastic information and a training-ground for developing familiarity with the new electronic technologies that are becoming common in the workplace, and (4) to build peer networks that would carry-over to and benefit their future career moves.

One undergraduate listserver has been developed and is in operation at the present time, with the goal of meeting the needs outlined above.

The Lambdapieta Undergraduate Listserver

The discussion of the operational listserver will include (1) background on the listserver, (2) undergraduate needs that have been met and unmet, and (3) some suggestions for possible future directions. Each issue will be addressed in turn.

The Lambdapieta Listserver

Lambdapieta, a listserver for undergraduate communication students, has been developed and is maintained and operated by the Gamma Gamma Chapter of Lambda Pi Eta at the University of Arkansas at Monticello (See Appendix A for information about subscribing to the list). Lambda Pi Eta is the National Communication Honor Society and will become part of the Speech

Communication Association on July 1, 1995. The Lambdapieta list has been in operation for approximately seven months.

The listserver is owned by the University of Arkansas at Monticello and is managed by James Roiger, a communication faculty member in the Division of Arts and languages who is also a Co-advisor for the university's Lambda Pi Eta Chapter. The list is unmoderated. The list was started as a service for undergraduate communication students belonging to Lambda Pi Eta, but is open to and encourages participation by all communication students, and was intended to fill the four needs discussed earlier (See appendix B for usage information).

Met and Unmet Student Needs

The list server has only been partially successful in meeting the four needs of (1) developing skills, (2) creating community, (3) identifying source locations, and (4) networking peers.

While I can offer personal experience with my students and as the list manager, no study, to my knowledge, has been conducted to determine whether this need is being filled.

The attempt to use the list as a way to create community has been less than successful. Very little discussion has been generated as of now on the list, in comparison to faculty-oriented lists. Several attempts to "seed" the list with discussion topics generated only minimal participation. A number

of students have carried on a discussion about different topics with me, but they have occurred as one-on-one interactions, not on the list. It may be that the medium is still very new to our subscribing students and they are hesitant to "expose" themselves in a public forum, or they may not feel confident enough about their knowledge levels to offer their insights. Given the short time the list has been in operation, I am hoping that the lack of participation is due to the newness of the medium, and that discussion will increase as the students become more familiar with CMC and the possibilities offered by an active listserver. Most students who have been enrolled in my classes where they use CMC with instructional accounts usually open their own student accounts during the next semester and many still correspond with me regularly.

As a resource base, I believe the listserver has been successful. I cull data sources and other information from other lists, including CRTNET, Comserve, Semios-L, Language-culture, and the Scout Report that I pass on through the listserver. Students have sent on sources they have also found. I forward all undergraduate conference notices, appropriate grant and award information, and graduate program announcements that I receive. One small problem with information flow has been that the Lambda Pi Eta National office has been maintained at Montclair State University where CMC services are not available to most faculty

and students. I expect this problem to disappear when the national Office moves to the SCA offices in Virginia in July. All information disseminated on the list has been archived and will be available for review by all subscribers by the start of the Fall semester.

Since there is some indication that students make contact on the list and then take their conversations off the list, there is no way of knowing presently whether students are developing extensive peer networks. Our Lambda Pi Eta Chapter members indicate that they are meeting people and getting to know them through CMC. This would suggest that networking is taking place in some small ways. Again, more experience with mode of communicating may increase its usefulness in this respect.

Overall, I would say that in the eight months of operation, that we have made some small steps to reaching our goal of meeting the four student needs identified. It is important that more universities and colleges open up their main frame systems to allow student accounts and that professors encourage their students to make use of CMC and guide their learning.

As the list matures and subscribers become more comfortable with the medium there are some ways that the list might be expanded.

Future Directions

There are three areas that we have plans for developing as

part of our list services that will increase the list's usefulness to our student subscribers.

First, we are investigating the possibility of opening a World Wide Web (WWW) Homepage browser (I'm still learning the writing program for creating WWW hypertext) which will expand the quantity and type of resources available.

Second, we would like to develop a directory containing information about graduate communication programs at colleges and universities in this and other countries. Students would be able retrieve information about the various graduate programs that are available and the programs' areas of specialty.

Third, we would like to develop a directory containing brief papers with current information on the different concepts and perspective within the discipline and written by master communication scholars in each of the chosen areas. Students would have access to the latest thinking of scholars at the forefront of chosen areas.

Once Lambda Pi Eta is integrated into the Speech Communication Association and we can call on the membership for assistance, we will begin developing areas two and three.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that at least four undergraduate student needs might be served by developing dedicated listservers and encouraging the students begin using computer-mediated

communication. These needs include (1) practicing communication skills, (2) creating a sense of communal fellowship, (3) providing updated sources of information that will aid their scholastic and career endeavors, and (4) developing electronic peer networks.

One such operating listserver is identified and is assessed for its ability to meet the four needs. The analysis suggested that the Lambdapieta Listserver has made a small start toward meeting these needs, but much more needs to be done.

Finally the paper identifies three areas for the future growth of the listserver, including (1) a World Wide Web browser, (2) a database of information about various graduate programs, and (3) a database of current thinking about communication concepts and perspectives written by master scholars.

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Appendix A

LAMBDAPIETA

A LISTSERVER FOR UNDERGRADUATE COMMUNICATION MAJORS

To join the list, send a message to:

lambdapieta-request@UAMont.edu

Leave the "subject" line blank.

The body of the message should state:

Sub lambdapieta your name

Please limit the message to this one line. The list server is an automated system. Any further information in the message will be interpreted as another command that the system will not be able to act on, and result in no action on any command in the message. Subscribers will receive a message from the server telling them they are added to the list, a list of commands that are valid for the server, and information about the operation of the list.

For further information, send a note to: Roiger@UAMont.edu or write: James F. Roiger, Division of arts and Languages, UAM Box 3460, University of Arkansas at Monticello, Monticello, AR 71656-3460.

Appendix B

Usage Frequencies on lambdapieta

All data reflects the status of the list on April 1, 1995.

List Totals

Number of Subscribers:	93
Number of Colleges and Universities Represented:	50
Number of Countries Represented:	4
Number of messages processed:	88

Message Breakdown

By category

Provided Sources of Information	45
Discussion Contributions	28
Information Requests	15

By month

1994:	August	12	September	16
	October	25	November	12
	December	4		
1995:	January	9	February	5
	March	5		